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## THE NARRATIVES OF BAMA AND BABY HALDER: A GEOCRITICISM PERSPECTIVE

### ABSTRACT

Geocriticism is a branch of literary criticism that approaches literary texts from a geographical perspective. Geocriticism basically asks geographical questions of literary texts and literary questions of geographical representations. In this way it brings together the study of the environment, social sciences and humanities. Geocriticism takes into consideration, four aspects – temporal data, textual criticism, narratology and spatial data present in the literary text.

The present paper examines two contemporary women writers, Bama and Baby Halder's texts, namely *Karukku* (2000) and *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) and disseminates the relevance of their work by analyzing it from a Geocriticism perspective and presents the results.

Key words: Geocriticism, literary questions, impact of geography on literary texts.

## INTRODUCTION

Mainstream discourses of writing in India depicting socio-cultural experiences have constructed a history, which narrate the experiences of the majority and exclude the experiences of women and the minorities, as well as the lower castes and the lower classes. It is as a result of great social and familial conflict that a few women writers have emerged from the lower caste and class in India to which the women writers Bama and Baby Halder belong. Bama is a Dalit-Christian and Baby Halder has worked as a domestic worker in various households as a child for sustenance. The present paper examines the literary work of two contemporary woman writers, Bama and Baby Halder's *Karukku* (2000) and *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) from the perspective of Geocriticism approach.

## GEOCRITICISM APPROACH

Geocriticism was introduced by French literary theorist Bertrand Westphal in the year 2011 through his work *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011). It considers all writing as a map and the ensuing criticism is called literary cartography.

As a literary criticism approach it employs four aspects of eco-geographical concern to a literary text like the following,

1. Temporal data as relations between the life and times of the author – biographical criticism
2. Facts of the text, date, place and time of its publication – history of the text- textual criticism
3. The story of the concerned text – Narratology

#### 4. The spatial data in the concerned text

The present paper demonstrates how eco-geographical concerns play a major role in literary texts *Karukku* (2000) and *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006).

### **TEMPORAL DATA AS RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE AUTHOR – BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM**

Temporal data means numerical or categorical values or composite information, which in literary parlance are details of biography of the writer.

In the selected literary texts, *Karukku* (2000) by Bama and *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) by Baby Halder, Bama is a Dalit Christian, belonging to the Parayajati which is a Tamil word to indicate low caste and Baby Halder is a domestic worker who belongs to the low class. Society discriminates against them as they belong to low caste and class respectively.

#### **BAMA - *Karukku* (2000)**

Bama is born in poverty stricken Paraya Caste – Dalit Christian family, which depends on seasonal labour work as a source of income. From childhood, she and her family members are discriminated; by the upper caste people. Other caste people do not share a seat with her in a public transport bus and do not accept food touched by her hands. Young Bama at school has no friends to share her sorrows or joy. Bama strives hard in life to overcome the shackles of her caste through education and financial empowerment. She completes her graduation and is employed as a teacher in a convent school. She observes the terrible situation of Parayajati children suffering the same ignominies as her and decides to enter the Christian convent as a nun to serve people of her community.

**BABY HALDER – *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006)**

Baby Halder too experienced a similar social status due to the fact that her father did not think it significant to educate a girl. Halder is interested in going to school and hates to stay at home, as it is a place where her work is not recognized and she does not receive any special attention, like she does at school. Halder's individuality is awakened at a young age and she expresses a strong desire to be educated, which is crushed by her father, who performs her marriage at the tender age of thirteen. She becomes a mother at fourteen. Halder struggles hard to educate her children, two sons and a daughter fighting her husband, who thinks education, is a waste of his hard earned money. Fed up with a non-supportive, inconsiderate, insensitive and irresponsible husband, Halder moved away to New Delhi in search of work. It is here that she was fortunate enough to find an empathetic employer, who encouraged Halder to read and write.

**II.FACTS OF THE TEXT, DATE, PLACE AND TIME OF ITS PUBLICATION ETC.,-  
HISTORY OF THE TEXT- TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

The facts of both the texts are as follows, Bama has recorded her life experiences in Tamil Language in 1992, which was later translated to English by Laxmi Holmstorm in 2000. Halder recorded her life experiences in Bengali language and published the book as *Alo Andhari* in 2000, which was later translated to English language as *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), by Urvashi Butalia. The above publication details of the text express the sempiternal, enduring and relevant experiences of women, which necessitated translation into a language of wide currency – English. The literary texts selected for the present paper were also translated into a number of Indian and foreign languages, demonstrating the empathetic readers worldwide. *Karukku* (2000) won the Crossword Book Award in 2000 and translated in to the French language. *A Life Less Ordinary*

(2006) was translated into twenty one languages, including thirteen foreign languages, like French, Japanese, German and Korean. Halder has been invited to Germany for sharing her experiences in different platforms.

The textual criticism exhibits real life experiences, which are inspiring and motivating. Both the women writers emphasize the statutory need for education of girls and consequent financial independence as tools in the process of empowering women. Patriarchal society discriminates against women and refuses to accord women a due status in society, even in the twenty first century, in India.

### **III. THE STORY OF THE CONCERNED TEXT- NARRATOLOGY**

The stories of the literary texts are real life and the method adopted by the women writers to narrate depicts the Bildungsroman technique. Bildungsroman is adopted to portray a character's inner spiritual conflict, beginning in childhood, struggling with it in youth and resolving the issue in adulthood. Bama and Baby Halder employ Bildungsroman quite effectively, to depict the same. The narrative is raw, staccato and eye-opening in its rendition. The piquant and terrible real life experiences of contemporary women caught in a web of man-made discriminations of caste and class are unbelievable in their bare sincerity.

### **IV. THE SPATIAL DATA IN THE CONCERNED TEXT**

Spatial data means geographic information that identifies the geographic location of features and boundaries on earth, or information about the entity that is being represented. It is this second aspect of the meaning of the word spatial data that geocriticism banks on.

*Karukku* (2000) and *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), depict information about the spatial data of the protagonists'. Bama and Halder's actions as individuals are governed by their surroundings. They are brought up in highly unorganized homes with no emotional and financial security in squalid homes in sordid locales. In fact the authors openly declare it a wonder that humans can exist in such unhealthy and unsanitary physical conditions. These physically disgusting conditions have an indelible impact on the minds of the women writers. They determine at a very young age to act and alter their status in life, through education and economic independence. They labour physically and psychologically to this end in an utterly undaunted manner, to emerge independent in society. Their struggle takes on epic proportions and spreads a social message of earning self-respect and honour for an individual through dint of hard work and perseverance. In fact, Bama replaces religion with garnering respect and honour as true devotion.

### **GEOCRITICISM APPROACH**

Geocriticism takes into consideration the above four aspects and explains how a literary text depicts the eco-geographical influences on the writer and finds place in the text.

The paper argues that biographical details, textual criticism, narrative technique and spatial data as seen in the literary texts examined in this paper clearly exhibit influences of eco-geography on the women writers. The opening sentence of the novel *Karukku* (2000) states, "our village is very beautiful: (2000:1) and the opening sentence of *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) is "until the age of four...it was a beautiful place with tall, high mountains and many different kinds of flowers" (2006:1), which demonstrate the fact that the women writers, early age has been spent in aesthetic and heavenly surroundings. Such eco-geographic surroundings have left an indelible mark on their psyche, which they want to recreate and capture for a life time. This is the goal they aspire to and

achieve at a later stage in life. The wretched and dismal physical surroundings and the equally degenerate and depraved minds of the patriarchal set-up around them force the women writers to take positive action towards redemption of their status. Thus eco-geographical conditions provide the necessary thrust to the women writers to work for achieving the impossible.

I emphasize the man-made, i.e., patriarchal creations like marginalization and discrimination of a woman as a second class citizen, is a significant spatial data factor in the life of the contemporary women writers. The spatial data contributes in the life of the women writers to identify education, financial independence, self-respect and honour for themselves as marks of prestige and status in the patriarchal set-up of today.

Bama wails out her agony at the current state of affairs in the following sentences,

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without wisdom, Beauty, dignity? What do we lack? (2000:24)

Halder asks a primary question of humanity around her,

Why can't people think of her (a woman) first as a human being and then a woman? We have the same limbs, eyes and a mind and can live our lives just like everyone else." (Interview The Hindu: April 15, 2007)

Halder demonstrates an interesting aspect of the independent woman she has become, following the publication of her debut novel, in saying,

We should stop depending on men that they will earn and we will cook and serve. If they step out to work, we also work at home (Interview The Hindu: April 15, 2007)

Why should a man give up his seat in a bus for a woman? This makes women weaker and gives men a self-delusory pride that they are better and stronger...we don't need that" (interview The Hindu: April 15, 2007)

Bama quit convent life as she was unable to digest the hypocrisies of the Church and its practitioners, thus becoming independent in reality, leaving behind the shackles of the patriarchal upper caste Church and finding true devotion in "reclaiming that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind" (2000:94).

Halder emphasizes the need for moving away from polarizing religious factors and thinks a humane approach to life is the need of the current social condition in India where talent, ability and skill of an individual should be the focus in opportunities for sustenance and livelihood (2006:112).

Therefore the present paper concludes that ecogeographical conditions have impact on literary texts.

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